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Strange yarns

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STRANGE YARNS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Matthew Bourgeois
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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

I leave a good portion of my art up to chance or my unconscious self, this shows me how closely my prints and drawings relate to the dream world. In dreams most of the physical laws are abandoned, reason and mind are not the dictators of the dream. Dreams have their own logic and are a perfect place to explore a narrative that leaves itself open for the viewer to put any number of meanings into.

Strange Yarns

One

The man awakens into a dream believing that he has died in the real world. He sits up and frantically turns around looking for his body. Fear overcomes him and the blackness becomes a space so real that he feels utterly lost and alone. Remembering to breathe, he stands up and looks around, only to find that he is locked away from the waking world by a wall of bone. Each vertebra is the size of a small elephant and covered in a thin mucous that wets his body as he falls, trying to climb one vertebra, then another, each in turn giving him more of a sense of loss and regret. He knows there is a safe place, a place of comfort and peace, only yards away, but this barrier is insurmountable. So he moves through this strange new world locked away from everything that he thinks is good and feels the wind blow onto him and through him. He knows he is trapped and that the way to freedom is a key that only his unconscious can decipher. He starts to forget 'real world' logic and studies the landscape and realizes how familiar the place is. He has been here before many a night in his dreams, but he knows tonight is different; his third eye has opened, and he is more lucid.

The man has sent himself on a quest, for what he does not know. He finds clothes and puts them on, realizing they are the garbs of storytellers of this dream world. He is one of many that shape and create the creatures and world around him. He is a storyteller, a magician of sorts, but still trapped and still alone. He wanders the desolate landscape and notices life everywhere, even in the stones and ground below him. He stops at the wall of vertebrae, a gate of hip and bone he cannot breach. He ponders this place and

watches the birds with the freedom to transcend and pass between the world of dreams and the waking world. He becomes jealous of the birds and forms a plan. Using his newly found power he takes from the rocks, the dew, and the dark sun rising over the land and creates a small creature with the head of bird and the body of a man. He has failed to make his own bird to carry him away, but he likes what he has done because it is his own. It was a creature from his mind, crafted from the elements around him, and this knowledge makes him a little more secure in this odd land.

With this done he goes in search of others lost in this place, and finds a powerful woman with the ability to heal the broken land. He watches as she blows her lotus flowers across the land, and they bring life wherever they touch down. From her he learns the secret that this place is no different than any other. It is all a matter of perception and a willingness to concede and adapt to the laws of this land. The moon comes out and the pale light reminds him of home. He goes in search of others and more knowledge that will take him from this world of mystery and wonder.

Two

“The threats to one’s inmost self from dragons and serpents point to the danger of the newly acquired consciousness being swallowed up again by the instinctive psyche, the unconscious. The lower vertebrates have from earliest times been favorite symbols of the collective psychic substratum, which is localized anatomically in the sub cortical centers, the cerebellum and the spinal cord. These organs constitute the snake.” Carl Jung (Princeton, p. 166)

The snake is always around, it follows the storyteller as he travels through the realm of his unconscious self. It is at once a physical barrier in this world and at the same time a living creature sent to watch over him. As he looks over valleys and distorted landscapes, the twin snake emerges and pushes him further into the dream world. The physical world still calls him, and his hands vibrate with an intensity he has never known in the waking world. He uses those hands, strong and calloused, to create new beings and creatures around him.

The snake waits, cold with cunning and the knowledge of life and death, as the storyteller watches the unknown through eyes filled with fear, but he knows that eyes often distort the truth. Using the snake's cold reason and his sure hands, he begins to heal the landscape. They weave the elements of light and dark to form the framework of a softer landscape, something more in tune with the storyteller's being. At first the land is still tender, a shadow of what it was before darkness and only a hint of the possibilities that might lie beneath.

Three

The storyteller is lost but even so feels a kinship with this world, as though it is his own creation, a part of his very being. But the lighting is wrong; he doesn't understand why the sun shines in such a cool fashion. It seems that the sun is the brighter twin of the moon and even though they come out fairly often together, neither is giving of sufficient illumination. He wanders by both moon and sun through animal runs along the border of this world. There is a strange vine that grows on the snake that is both landscape and jailer. He often watches as the hummingbirds buzz around and pick at the

vine. Through observation he concludes that though the snake appears to be just a spine, it must also be a living organism. It seems somehow much a part of himself, even though he could not say why. After watching the birds for days he decides to feast with them. He slowly walks over and picks a piece of fruit that grows on the vines. In that instant he sees the world from the perspective of everyone he knew in the waking world.

Bombarded by images of life frozen at one moment, his older perceptions of reality begin to crumble. His eyes are the eyes of the world, and all he wishes for is to return to his limited senses. This instantaneous knowledge is too much to bear and he begins to scream. The hummingbirds come closer and start to feed off of his fear. He then realizes that they don't find nourishment from the vine but from wanderers like him that make the same mistake as he has. The birds buzz around him gentle and close; he feels their desire and softness as he embraces them instead of fighting. They take their fill and he understands that too much knowledge can kill just as easily as ignorance in this landscape. After a couple of hours the fruit that gave him many perspectives wears off, and the storyteller purges a cold black heart and leaves it to grow into more vines for other unwary travelers to eat off of. He feels the emptiness of a million perceptions that have faded from his consciousness and sets off with the knowledge that his memories and boundaries define the core of his conscious mind

Four

The storyteller, once lost and hungry, walking through a dark and unclear landscape, came upon a rabbit the size of an elephant. It was a rabbit dreaming of its own world, where it became the master and humans would live in little wooden hutches. Once

it noticed the storyteller the rabbit tried to use its will to put him in a hutch with others. Wanting to be caged no more than he already was in the dream world, the storyteller fought the rabbit for twelve days and nights until finally he succeeded in felling the big creature. He was lonely as he dressed the meat and built a huge fire by a cliff. Unbeknownst to him the fire shone through the dark landscape and attracted four strangers who were also wanderers in this cruel place. All were as hungry as he and happy for companionship, and he gladly shared his meal with them. Once each one was satiated they began talking, and the storyteller came to realize that each of them in their own way was a teller of myths and half-truths just as was.

The first was a short man, fragile and beautiful, who spun yarns with the greatest of ease. He looked as if he would break at any moment but told a tale so strong and with such precision that no one would be able to destroy the story he wove. From this man the storyteller learned his first truth: precision is the key to telling small truths that weave even the most unbelievable stories into reality. The second was a tall man whom the artist may have met in the waking world. He knew many secret stories, which he hid in the most obvious of places. The third was a wanderer who may have most closely resembled the storyteller in style. He came across as direct and owning no faults of his own. From this traveler the storyteller learned the art of repetition. Tell a lie often enough and it becomes a form of truth. This newly found companion could layer a yarn so well that even he was unable to decipher the beginning or end of a tale. The last wanderer was a woman who ended all of her stories with an exclamation point. Whereas the other travelers used layering to build innuendo and intrigue, she would throw a burning log onto their stories, and from this traveler the storyteller learned to abandon the accepted

norms of weaving a tale. From these four he learned a great deal about the essence of his being and the intricacies of creating the world around himself.

The next day when the storyteller awoke he was alone with the ashes of the previous night's fire still glowing. He continued on his dimly lit journey remembering and utilizing what he had learned from the strangers on their own weird quests. He always kept in mind to be precise, deceptive, repetitive, and abrasive when changing the landscape around him.

Five

“Without expectation, one will always perceive the subtlety; and, with expectation, one will always perceive the boundary.” Lao Tzu (Doubleday p. 27)

Still lost in the world of dreams after many months of wandering, the storyteller searches for his physical body. He walks through the path of darkness alone, but for the strangers he meets when the stars come out. He cries in anguish and out of the surrounding darkness a llama appears, gentle and strong. The llama approaches, but the storyteller is afraid of the truths about himself the creature might reveal, and so he flees. For miles through the ever-changing landscape blindly he runs, occasionally chancing upon the wall of bone that is his cage. No matter how far or how fast he runs the words of the llama are carried by the wind. The storyteller stops and listens. He hears his regrets, his faults, and his trespasses through the years. They flow into him and past him, changing him, healing him. An ill wind the llama was not but a wind of change freeing him of his fears. Weakness turns into strength, faults into acceptance, and trespasses into

lessons. He has found his path, and while still lost in this murky world has become a little more meek and apt to learn from all of the experiences of his life.

Six

The storyteller's eyes begin to open, a quick flutter and light is all around him. He wakes, caught in his web of dreams while remembering the world around him. His bed is cozy and warm, but underneath he is cold, feeling the snake curl around the landscape. He lets his mind stay in two realities, realizing he will have to get up soon and go to work to feel the daily grind, but for now he can relax. The world he helped to create is falling fast, but still he holds on, searching through the characters and beings from last night and searching for a bit of truth. He finds none, but the struggle to maintain the sleep world is fun for him. It binds him to a larger universe that only remains on the periphery during his waking hours. He sits up and smiles, taking a last look at the world behind him, knowing all he has to do to go back is close his eyes.

Summary

This body of work started when I began exploring the idea of doing unconscious drawings. I usually work with a pen on paper and start drawing the same way an automatic writing exercise would ensue. There are usually no preconceived ideas; I like to let the pen tell me where it wants to go. The drawings are pieces of my consciousness that are either on the top of my mind or more often not repressed feelings spilling out onto the page. These drawings usually evolve into a bigger piece that have many layers of both focused ideas and subconscious ramblings. By not tying myself down to ideas I have

intended, my work begins to take on a life of its own. In evaluating my work I realized that chance and my unconscious self determine a good portion of it. These prints and drawings are closely related to my dream world. Physical laws are abandoned; reason and mind are not the dictators of dreams. They have their own logic and are a perfect place to explore a narrative landscape.

A major turning point in my life happened about a year and a half ago. I found out that I had fetal tissue growing along my spine. I had to have major back surgery to remove it and my recovery time has been slow and I will never be my complete self again. Because of this I began to think about my twin as a real figure and my spinal cord as a wall that holds me back. The most effective way I am able to work through my unconscious feelings is through my art. In the print “Artist As Surgeon” I am able to heal myself somewhat emotionally, even though the physical healing came from surgery and time. Through this body of work I am able to remove myself from my physical problems and create a magical and sometimes bizarre world, offering me insightful perspectives on life.



Image 1. *An Offering*, Silkscreen, 28" x 40"



Image 2. *The Breaking*, Silkscreen, 28" x 40"



Image 3. *A Binging*, Silkscreen, 28" x 40"



Image 4. *The Purging*, Silkscreen, 28" x 40"



Image 5. *Artist As Surgeon*, Acrylic
Woodcut, 30'' x 40''



Image 6. *Untitled*, Woodcut, 20'' x 28''



Image 7. *Phenomenology*, Installation view, 280'' x 54''



Image 8. *Phenomenology*, Installation detail, 56" x 34"



Image 9. *Phenomenology*, Installation detail, 56" x 34"

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Vita

Matthew Bourgeois was born in Opelousas, Louisiana, on June 12, 1978. He graduated High School from the metropolis of Church Point, Louisiana, and took a boat across the swamp to the University of Louisiana Lafayette.